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ABSTRACT

In this publication, the policy positions of the National Education Association (NEA) on early childhood education in the public schools are delineated. The NEA's proposals for early childhood program standards are also offered. Sections of the publication concern: (1) characteristics of the early childhood arena; (2) principles and standards of early childhood programs in the public schools; and (3) NEA action at the national, state, and local levels. The NEA believes that public schools should be a primary provider of high quality early childhood education programs designed to serve students from 3 to 8 years of age. (27 references) (RH)

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Developed by the NEA
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In the fall of 1989, the NEA Board of Directors charged the Standing Committee on Instruction and Professional Development (IPD Committee) "to develop and recommend for adoption principles and/or policy positions that can guide the development of effective public school programs in early childhood education."

The committee devoted much of its first meeting of 1989-90 (October 13-15) to a review of current materials and critical commentary in the early childhood field and to discussion and interaction with three early childhood experts. These experts included two NEA members, one a kindergarten teacher from Tennessee and co-chair of the newly formed NEA Early Childhood Educators' Caucus, and the other a California kindergarten teacher and statewide early childhood activist. The third was the public affairs director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).¹ In subsequent meetings, the committee reviewed additional major publications in the field and completed its final report and recommendations.

The policy position and program standards recommended by the committee were adopted by the NEA Board of Directors in May 1990.

1. NAEYC is the major umbrella organization for the diverse interests comprising early childhood advocates, experts, and providers. Its membership more than doubled (from 32,000 to 70,000) during the decade of the eighties, and it annually convenes the nation's largest conference of early childhood educators. The NEA has had official, designated representatives to NAEYC in each of the last several years.

Well-known social, demographic, and economic trends identify a tremendous challenge for the United States in providing education and care for young children. These trends are captured in four interconnected phenomena:

1. Changes in family structure and in the roles and relationships of family members.
2. Changes in the makeup of the labor force.
3. Changes in the demography of poverty.
4. Increases in the preschool population and changes in its ethnic composition.

Selected data demonstrate the magnitude of the challenge:

- ☐ Between 1960 and 1985, the percentage of traditional households — father, mother, two school-age children — decreased from 60 percent to 7 percent (5).
- ☐ More than 3.2 million mothers work outside the home, and 200,000 more mothers join the labor force yearly (8). The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that 80 percent of all children under age six will have mothers working outside the home by 1995 (6).
- ☐ In 1980, the number of children under age six was 19.6 million (20). In 1990, the number is expected to reach 23 million, a 17 percent increase (26). Also in 1990, an estimated 5.8 million children under age six will live in poverty (27) — and poverty is the most valid predictor of school failure (23).
- ☐ Minority children are disproportionately represented in poverty statistics. The proportion of Black children living in poor families was 51.1 percent between 1983 and 1984 (18). Two out of five Hispanic children under the age of six are living in poverty (23).

The need for education and care programs for young children is not being met. Demand far outstrips supply, and demand for particular types of programs exacerbates the crisis.² Moreover, the field of providers is complex, variable, and changing — and implicit in that variability are deficiencies and competition.

Lawrence J. Schweinhart (25), director of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, estimates that “today’s early childhood programs—day care homes, day care centers, and nursery schools — serve 30 percent of the nation’s 16.1 million children under age 5.” Nursery schools, which include most Head Start and public school programs, serve only 6 percent of these children.³

While the number of states which fund prekindergarten programs more than trebled from 1984 to 1989 (10), the number of available programs still is inadequate to the challenge⁴. Sixty percent of them are part-day programs for at-risk four-year-olds (3). Another 25 percent are programs that may run as long as a full school day (10). Programs in only five states serve children for the length of a work day (3). The public schools also frequently sponsor a range of other programs for children under age five, including Chapter I prekindergartens, preschool special education, locally funded prekindergartens, Head Start, and various forms of child care (9).

There are many other forms of sponsorship of early childhood programs, including employers or industries, churches, United Way organizations, parent cooperatives, private proprietary firms (e.g., KinderCare, Huntington Learning Centers) and Montessori schools. But here enter the issues of access, quality, purpose, stability, and cost. Some of these programs are operated for profit, others are not; some are registered with or licensed by states, others are not; some have working relationships with various social service or community agencies, others do not. The standards for these types of programs and the personnel they employ vary widely.

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2. For example, while some 95 percent of all five-year-olds are enrolled in public school kindergartens (20), most of these kindergartens are half-day programs which may not meet the needs of working parents.
 3. Schweinhart defines day care centers as facilities children attend for full workdays while their parents are otherwise occupied, while nursery schools are center-based, half-day programs.
 4. A survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures (19) reported that 41 states identified early childhood education as one of the top five issue areas that should be addressed.

Quality is key to effective early childhood programming. For as early childhood experts note, "unless program quality is carefully defined and maintained, an early childhood classroom is just another place for a child to be" (24). The components of high-quality programs for young children are rooted in well-established research about the developmental levels of children and about developmentally appropriate education. In addition, newer longitudinal research studies are demonstrating the long-term benefits of high-quality preschool programs.

NAEYC (11) defines the concept of developmental appropriateness as having "two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness." Human development research "indicates that there are universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children during the first nine years of life." These changes occur in all development domains. At the same time, "each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as [an] individual personality, learning style, and family background."

Developmentally appropriate curriculum and practice thus are based upon teachers' knowledge of the typical development of children within particular age spans and also are responsive to children's individual differences. NAEYC also identifies four developmental age groups—birth to age three, three-year-olds, four- and five-year-olds, and five- through eight-year-olds in the primary grades—each requiring differing, appropriate forms of practice. These distinctions derive from the work of such well-known researchers and child development theorists as Piaget, Montessori, Erickson, and others.⁵

These distinctions also define *effective, high-quality* programs for young children. NAEYC (15) identifies six critical program characteristics:

1. The curriculum must be developmentally appropriate. It must encourage a child's development through appropriate child-initiated learning activities.

5. Work by these researchers indicates that a child's most productive and influential learning years occur before the age of five. Experts generally agree that 50 percent of intelligence is formed by age four. The greatest portion of language is mastered by age three. This growth in learning, together with the development of curiosity and social skills, lays the foundation for all future learning. A child's failure in the early years to develop adequately in these areas has been shown to lead directly to underachievement in the elementary grades and beyond.

2. Small group size and favorable staff-child ratios are necessary. The recommended class size is two adults to every 16-20 three- to five-year-olds.
3. Teachers and administrators must be well trained in early childhood education and child development. Schweinhart, et al. (24) report that the "one teacher characteristic [which] predicts program quality and effectiveness [is] the amount of job-related training in early childhood education that a teacher has received."
4. Ancillary services — e.g., in-service training, curriculum supervision, evaluation and assessment — must be complementary to and support the child development curriculum.
5. Parents must be actively and integrally involved as partners with teachers in fostering a child's development.
6. Programs must be sensitive to and meet children's health and nutritional needs as well as families' needs for child care and other social services.

Research of the last 20 years indicates that children who participate in high-quality, preschool programs gain distinct, quantifiable advantages in future school performance, in later employment, and in their social and emotional adjustment. Studies of the well-known High/Scope Perry Preschool Project⁶ showed that the children involved (a) maintained IQ gains for up to four years after the program ended, (b) were assigned less frequently to special education classes, (c) were retained in grade less frequently, and (d) were more likely to graduate from high school and pursue post secondary education or training than other children (2).

6. This ongoing, small, but significant study is tracing the effects of preschool education on the lives of 123 Black youths who were three- and four-year-olds when the study began in 1962.

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Family and societal benefits also have been documented by the Perry Preschool studies. Mothers who were involved in the project increased their earning power due to expanded training and subsequent employment opportunities. Programs of this sort were shown to reduce costs for special education and welfare, reduce demands on the criminal justice system, result in higher employment rates among teens, and produce a large return on taxpayer investment (2). A good one-year preschool program for disadvantaged children returns \$6 for every taxpayer dollar invested, according to High/Scope (24).

Research of another sort underscores the funding, staffing, and standards dilemmas common to many early childhood programs. The current "staffing crisis" in early childhood programs, according to Granger (7) —

... is not in programs in the public schools. Rather, it is in child-care programs and in such early education programs as Head Start. We can see the problem in the number of teaching positions that are filled by temporary replacements and in a 40 percent annual turnover rate ... [as well as] annual salaries [which] average about \$12,000 in Head Start programs and about \$11,000 in child-care programs.

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Public schools are the predominant provider of services to five- to eight-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten and in the primary grades. Early childhood advocates generally accede this range of responsibility to the public schools. But debate continues about whether and how the public schools should be a primary provider of services to *preschoolers*. The authors of a 1988 resource guide (1) summarized trends in state involvement in public preschool programs in two words: "growth and uncertainty." They went on to assert that "[u]ltimately, we should be aiming for a continuous ungraded curriculum flow from preschool through 3rd grade. Such a structure would push success upward rather than pushing failure downward."

High/Scope Director Schweinhart (25) identifies three strengths of the public schools: "professionalism, accountability, and universality." He also has made it clear that the "public schools will have to be transformed before they will be able to meet the diverse needs of young children and their families." And, he says, Yale University's Edward Zigler — known as the father of Head Start — recently reversed a position of long standing and "proposed that the public schools become the hub of a universal child care system."

The Public School Early Childhood Study (completed in 1987) examined public school programs for children younger than five over a three-year period (10). While the results were mixed, researchers concluded that the public schools "are likely to become a more common source [of early childhood education] for three- and four-year-olds in the future." They also noted that the "vast majority of [current] public school prekindergarten programs are aimed at certain children — usually poor or otherwise disadvantaged four-year-olds" (9).

The IPD Committee believes that the public schools are and should be a primary provider of early childhood services for preschool, kindergarten, and primary school children.

The committee identified seven key reasons for this position:

1. Programs offered by the public schools are universal, in the sense that all children should have equal access. They are low cost or no cost to the child and his/her family, and they must accommodate all children equitably.
2. Programs offered by the public schools are regularly and publicly accountable — to parents, to taxpayers, to local school boards, to state agencies, to the state legislature, to the Congress and the nation.
3. Participation in programs offered by the public schools enables children to benefit from full and appropriate articulation between the various developmental, educational, and institutional levels comprising the schooling process.
4. Public schools serve as an acknowledged socializing agent, enabling children from all walks of life to interact with and learn from each other in the interests of building a strong, educated, and able citizenry for this democracy.
5. Public school systems are singular and established infrastructures enabling funds to be easily channeled and economies or efficiencies of scale to be realized. Bus routes, school health programs, cafeteria services, and building utilization policies are examples of public school administrative and program structures which enable many services to be provided in an economical or efficient fashion.
6. The public school work force is the most stable and highly credentialled work force in pre-K-12 education.
7. The public schools are and will continue to be engaged in systemic restructuring efforts which necessarily will require consensus building and broad community involvement.

In identifying a set of principles for Association advocacy in the field of early childhood education today, the committee began with the premise that *all* education is developmental in nature — and that education spans an individual's lifetime, from birth to death.⁷ These concepts are integral to the NEA's 1984 *Open Letter to America on Schools, Students, and Tomorrow* and its Nine Principles of Educational Excellence. *Developmentally appropriate practice* was noted elsewhere in this report as a tenet of high-quality early childhood programming. It is also a central concept in extant NEA policy about public school prekindergarten and kindergarten programs (Resolution C-3).

To effectuate Association advocacy of the public schools as a primary provider of high-quality early childhood programs in the nineties and beyond, the committee recommends adoption of the following policy position and set of program standards:⁸

Position

The Association believes that the public schools should be a primary provider of high-quality early childhood education programs designed to serve students ages three to eight. The Association urges states to *mandate the availability* of early childhood education programs in the public schools for all three- and four-year-olds. States also should encourage and support efforts by community agencies to identify and place in such programs children who can most benefit from the services provided.

Standards

- ☐ Early childhood education programs in the public schools must address the needs of *both* parents and child. Community needs must determine the program model(s) to be employed, and full-day programs must be available.
- ☐ High-quality programming should properly integrate day care and education components and be supported by the resources and staff necessary to accomplish the delivery of both kinds of services.

7. The committee explicitly recognized that present federal law provides incentives to states to provide certain public school services for individuals with specific handicapping conditions from birth to age 21.

8. The committee notes that adoption of this policy recommendation will require review and appropriate revision of extant Association policy by the responsible governance body. In addition, adoption of this policy recommendation will have distinct implications for the work of the NEA Special Committee on Organizational Streamlining.

- ☐ Both teachers and administrators associated with public school early childhood programs should complete a *distinguishable* preparation program and should hold a *distinguishable* state-issued license to practice.
- ☐ Teaching and administrative staff of current public school pre-K-3 programs which are adopting a developmentally appropriate curriculum should be provided training in early childhood development at district expense.
- ☐ School districts also should offer at their expense appropriate courses of training for educational support staff working in early childhood education programs.
- ☐ Assessment methods used in early childhood programs should be appropriate to a child's developmental level. The use of norm-referenced, standardized testing instruments in early childhood education programs is inappropriate. In addition, such practices as retention in grade and ability grouping are inapplicable to developmentally appropriate programs for young children.⁹
- ☐ Teaching, administrative, and support staff working in early childhood education should be compensated in the same manner and according to the same standards established for other, similarly situated district personnel.
- ☐ Parents must be actively involved in a partnership with teachers and support staff in the design, delivery, and evaluation of all early childhood services provided by the public schools.
- ☐ Funding for new or expanded early childhood programs in the public schools should come from new funding sources and be a shared responsibility of national, state, and local governments.
- ☐ The public schools increasingly should serve as coordinating agencies for all community services which need to be brought to bear in the service of parents and young children. This coordinating responsibility can include a variety of diagnostic, training, and networking functions. In time public schools should become the linchpin of community activity aimed at meeting the needs of young children.

9. NEA policy on developmentally appropriate programs for young children and on student assessment is lodged in Resolutions C-3, C-6, and E-7. Other resources on assessment and appropriate practice issues include the NAEYC publications named in the list of references appended to this report.

Efforts to restructure the public schools are the threshold for more serious and far-reaching public school involvement in early childhood education. Those who consistently argue against public school early childhood programs tend to cite public school "traditions" (e.g., high teacher/student ratios) which are inimical to high-quality programs for young children. It is the committee's firm belief, however, that these very "traditions" (and many others) will be evaluated and significantly modified as school staffs restructure the organization, content, and delivery of educational services to students.

It is in this context that the Association can assume a major leadership role in the early childhood field, and that the public schools are likely to become ever more significant providers of services to three- and four-year-olds. As several commentators have noted, "the public schools have a vested interest in early childhood programs, because these programs give children better preparation for K-12 schooling" (24).

Key assets the Association can bring to bear at the national, state, and local levels *in support of and in collaboration with* other early childhood advocates include —

- ☐ A track record of activity in support of high-quality early childhood programs.
- ☐ The power of the voice of the *organized* profession, together with human, organizational, and financial resources.
- ☐ The understanding of and the ability to represent the interests of the wide range of school personnel who deliver services to young children.
- ☐ Well-established and effective advocacy of excellence and equity in education, as well as a strong commitment to multicultural education.
- ☐ A commitment to high standards in practice, undergirded by continuing efforts to strengthen state licensure standards, eliminate substandard credentials, achieve appropriate compensation levels for all education personnel, and proscribe detrimental district employment practices.
- ☐ Experience in using the tool of collective bargaining to determine and improve the conditions for teaching and learning.

- ☐ Organized efforts to work more effectively with parents and to encourage greater parental involvement in education decisions.
- ☐ Access to networks and a well-honed ability to work in coalition with others.
- ☐ Political organizing, lobbying, and law-making skills.
- ☐ An unabashed commitment to a public school system in the United States which can and will work to develop the full potential of every student.

The IPD Committee believes it is time for Association members to assume a more active, *external* leadership role in the early childhood arena. The committee strongly recommends that this role be *collaborative* — that the Association at the national, state, and local levels work to forge coalitions or join forces with other interests with similar objectives. The early childhood field is heavily populated by diverse but identifiable and established interests with great expertise. The Association can be influential in facilitating collaborative efforts to achieve common ends. Suggested Association activities at the national, state, and local levels follow.

At the national level:

- ☐ Actively pursue NEA's extensive congressional agenda of child care and development issues.
- ☐ Seek support for establishment of a national database on early childhood care and education programs.
- ☐ Engage in coalition-building with other early childhood advocacy groups.
- ☐ Provide Association representation to other advocacy groups.
- ☐ Provide membership forums for discussing early childhood education issues and interacting with major figures in the field.
- ☐ Disseminate information and suggested action plans on early childhood education issues and trends to affiliates. This should include information about early childhood systems or programs in other countries (e.g., Sweden, France).
- ☐ Expand the number of professional publications about early childhood available to members.
- ☐ Support experimental or innovative early childhood programs.

At the state level:

- ☐ Encourage or support efforts to engage in significant longitudinal research on intervention and preschool programs.
- ☐ Initiate or join pursuit of a state-level early childhood education agenda which echoes (as appropriate) the NEA's national legislative agenda.
- ☐ Seek new state funding for the initiation or expansion of public school early childhood programs.
- ☐ Establish productive working relationships with established early childhood advocacy groups.
- ☐ Pursue strengthened standards for teacher licensure, as well as professional control of state licensure bodies. Determine whether state licensing practices need to be altered to provide for identifiable credentials in early childhood development.
- ☐ Examine the need to develop high-quality nontraditional routes to licensure (consistent with recommended NEA guidelines) which will encourage and enable qualified support staff or professionals from other fields to become licensed to work in early childhood programs.¹⁰
- ☐ Become an agent for bringing attention to and building understanding of a state's interest in ensuring that young children's developmental and care needs are met.
- ☐ Encourage and enable the development of model public school early childhood programs, potentially focusing on such diverse "markets" as dense urban districts and sparse rural districts.
- ☐ Examine opportunities for the creation of incentives to business to collaborate with the public schools in making care and education services for young children available to workers.

10. See the 1989-90 IPD Committee report entitled "Ensuring High Standards in Nontraditional Routes to Licensure."

At the local level:

- ☐ Define, as appropriate, the state of or the need for high-quality early childhood programming in local public schools.
- ☐ Encourage and enable dialogue among affected Association members and local early childhood advocates about the nature, sufficiency, and directions of early childhood programming in local public schools. Pursue such discussions with district administrators and the school board as appropriate.
- ☐ Organize school staff and informed parents or representatives of local social service agencies to provide information to interested community groups about high-quality early childhood programs. Develop a community education program complete with speakers bureau.
- ☐ Build the base of understanding and support within the teaching and support staff ranks in local schools. Establish an inside outreach program designed to persuade current school staff to invest time, interest, and energy in the pursuit of high-quality early childhood programming.
- ☐ Determine the local Association's willingness and capability to represent the interests of early childhood educators and support staff in bargaining, or through other advocacy mechanisms.
- ☐ Develop and engage in thorough assessment of model early childhood programs in public schools.
- ☐ Accelerate or expand efforts at all levels of local schooling to more fully and continuously engage parents in responsibility for and decisionmaking about their children's education.

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